



THE TEAR

A SHORT STORY

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Story Excerpt

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“Men are still men. The despot's wickedness
Comes of ill teaching, and of power's excess—
Comes of the purple he from childhood wears,
Slaves would be tyrants if the chance were theirs.”

Victor Hugo, *The Vanished City*
A reimagining in English verse

Fidelo was mesmerized by the way the light hit the corpse.

The splintered beams of morning sun sliced through the warworn church walls, casting a faint yellow band upon the eyes of the deceased. It was as if one of the Carnival masks he and Lázaro had donned as youths had been worn too long, an eternal stain from a lifetime of hiding.

Fidelo tried to collect his memories, to assemble a mosaic of their childhood together in the slums of Chipuelta. The recollections came in fragments—the stealing, the fighting, the battles—but only the images of Carnival seemed to last. The nights of joyous costumed celebration. The masks of traditional Chipueltan yellow cloth.

The crowd behind him continued to grow. A snapshot of Chipuelta—his Chipuelta. Battle-hardened revolutionaries. Mud-stained farmers. Half-clothed children. The word was spreading into the nearby pueblos: Don Lázaro had been killed.

Taka's massive frame jarred Fidelo. "Damned Chito," he said, his annoyance written across the divots and ridges of his scarred face. Taka's disfigurement, the legacy of a childhood pox and countless street fights, was the stuff of folklore and nightmares. Betray the cause, it was said, and you will awake in the dark, the giant Taka above you, his knife beneath your chin, his terrifying visage the last thing you see.

Fidelo looked down the line of mourners to see Chito forcing his way into the front pew. He would not want to lose status by sitting anywhere else. Only the revolution's most important people shared the front row with Fidelo. The other colonels were all there. And the women, the lone two of any standing: his longtime secretary, Marisa, and Don Lázaro's mother—Aunt Carolina—as she was known to all.

The priest recited the final lines of the Chipueltan prayer for the dead. Fidelo's cue. Taka grabbed Fidelo's arm as he stood, the crushing strength was there but did not assert itself. "I look forward to your speech, General," Taka whispered. "It is time for you to emerge from the shadow of Don Lázaro." Fidelo gave Taka a nod of acknowledgement then turned.

General. For more than twenty years, only Don Lázaro had held the title.

Fidelo walked slowly onto the ambo, which was little more than a platform of unfinished wood. It held a weathered table, a few plants, and, on this day, a casket. Every eye in the church was upon him as he walked towards Lázaro, waiting on him to pay tribute to the great leader. Fidelo placed a hand on the side of the coffin, looking down at his dead friend. The light made Lázaro seem so alive, as if the bullet scars on his face might smooth and he might rise, yellow mask and all, to lead the revolution to its consummation.

In the rush to plan the funeral, to spread the word without the government learning the details, Fidelo had not had time to process that Lázaro was gone, much less to mourn. The sorrow rose in Fidelo's chest like a fist. He tried to swallow, to push the feeling down, but it pressed upward, swelling into his throat, inexorable. He quickly turned from the coffin, instinctively looking to Aunt Carolina for comfort. Her eyes were the same ones he had always known—fierce, proud, vengeful. The same eyes in which he had sought comfort on the worst day of his life.

The government checkpoint.

His father yelling. The soldiers yelling. The AK-47s sticking through the open truck windows.

Fiery flashes. Explosive blasts. The wet warmth of his parents' blood spraying against his face. His parents' limp bodies hemming him in from both sides. Jerking their final paroxysms. Choking their bloody breaths.

Deafened, disoriented. The pressure from his father's body disappeared. Then his father did. Then hands—hairy and big and bloody—came for him.

Falling. The baked dirt crushing against his young frame.

Towering. The sun-ringed soldier standing demonically over him.

Yelling. The din of his hellscaped ears distorting the words. "Run, or die."

Arms pumping. Ears ringing.

A look back.

Smiles. Laughs. Bottles tilted skyward. His parents' lifeless bodies on the side of the road.

Just another day.

He ran, lungs afire and eyes burning with dust, until...A door, a knock, a tale breathlessly told. Then, those eyes. Aunt Carolina's eyes. Fire behind water. An indescribable mixture of rage and sorrow. She placed her hands on his undeveloped shoulders, light but firm—bracing him, embracing him—then she uttered the words that had stayed with him his whole life, the words that had both made him warm and made him shudder.

"You are with us now," she said, "and one day, we will kill them all."

He tried to be brave, to not cry, to be a real Chipueltan man, and he succeeded, until his best friend, nine years old, ran to him. Lázaro did not care to show strength, did not even try to hide his tears. He threw his arms around Fidelo and squeezed, his tear-soaked face pressing against Fidelo's. "Now we really are brothers," he said.

It was too much. Fidelo burst—crying inconsolably—holding his best friend as tightly as he could.

He was a man now, yet that same boy all over again. His eyes were to the point of overflow, the faces in the crowded church before him beginning to blur. He swallowed—a thick, choking swallow. He knew he would be permitted a few tears in front of the crowd, but the macho sort, the kind that quietly rolled down the cheek. Not what was coming.

The lump pushed higher into his throat—thicker, heavier. He tried to swallow it away once more; this time, it was not enough. He turned abruptly away from the crowd and lurched towards the casket, leaning in to give Lázaro a quick final kiss, then hurrying off the platform and out the back door of the church, saying nothing.



Fidelo awoke with a gasp. Disoriented, and still drunk. Church bells rang out. In the middle of the night? And fireworks. Why were there fireworks? He closed his eyes, listening.

Not fireworks. A gun battle. Distant, but unmistakable.

(TO BE CONTINUED...)

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